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SUBJECT: ANGOLA: FNLA FOUNDER LAID TO REST

REF: LUANDA 796

11. (SBU) SUMMARY: Following an official state ceremony in Luanda, FNLA founder Holden Roberto was buried in his native Zaire Province on August 8th, 2007. Despite mutterings that the GRA had deliberately kept him in poverty, the GRA pulled out all the stops for an elaborate funeral for Roberto. Attention is already turning to the battle for party leadership, and many wonder if the death of its founder will lead to the end of the party. END SUMMARY

"Modern-day King" Laid to Rest

12. (U) On August 8, 2007 Holden Alvaro Roberto, founder and president of the FNLA, was laid to rest in his hometown of Mbanza Kongo in front of thousands of people. He was buried in a sacred burial ground, reserved for kings from his Bakongo ethnic group. Members of the former Bakongo kingdom) which covered parts of modern-day Gabon, Congo Brazzaville, and the DRC - came to assist the interment, and often referred to the late Roberto as a present-day king of the Bakongos.

13. (SBU) GRA representation at the interment included the Ministers of Justice, Territorial Administration and War Veterans, as well as the Vice Minister for Culture and Zaire's Provincial Governor. Official eulogies from President Dos Santos, Prime Minister Nando, National War Veterans and the GRA were read by representatives. The previous day, President Dos Santos had laid a wreath by the coffin of the deceased during the official lying-in-state ceremony held at the National Assembly. The GRA paid all funeral expenses and established an inter-ministerial commission to oversee logistical arrangements.

Act of Contrition for "Nationalist Hero"

14. (SBU) The elaborate interment ceremony and flowing eulogies were seen as acts of guilt by President Dos Santos, who frustrated and belittled Roberto while he was alive and in need of assistance. Many have criticized the GRA for allowing a man now labeled as a national hero to die in poverty. The GRA marginalized the FNLA after the party split in 1999, in a schism supposedly engineered by MPLA infiltration and influence. Citing the lack of an agreed-upon party president, the GRA then froze FNLA party funds with a court order in 2000, and has not yet lifted the order. This has severely restricted party activity and limited funds available for medical care as Roberto's health worsened. Anger at the GRA's treatment of Roberto united Bakongos from all spheres, and ideological barriers were dropped as Roberto's wish to be buried in Mbanza Kongo trumped President Dos Santos request that he be buried in Luanda.

FNLA: Hope for the Future?

15. (SBU) All eyes now turn to the looming fight for party leadership. Because of Roberto's long illnesses and frequent

absences from the country, the party has been virtually leaderless for years. Party loyalties are divided between the two current vice presidents, but neither has a sure shot at the FNLA presidency. Lucas Ngonda, who has claimed the party presidency since 1999, is seen by many FNLA members as a traitor paid by the MPLA to create friction within the party. His failure to attend the interment due to "health reasons" and his brief appearance at the state ceremony surrounded by bodyguards due to "security concerns" was criticized by party insiders. Ngola Kabangu is Robert's chosen heir, but is Kimbundu, the traditional ethnic base of the MPLA. Party insiders also question the willingness for party faithful to elect a non-Bakongo to the top post, and are said to be looking for a third candidate who can overcome old divisions and lead the FNLA to a rebirth. Announcement of a date for the party congress is expected in the fall.

16. (SBU) COMMENT: Though Roberto's death temporarily united the Bakongos, many doubt that the fractured and torn FNLA will be able to turn this sentiment to its advantage. Once a western-backed powerhouse, the party has been on the decline since its military force was virtually annihilated in 1976/76. Its poor showing in the 1992 legislative elections (2.4% of the electorate vs. the 2.27% received by the PRS, a party formed the previous year) was seen as yet another nail in the party's coffin. In any event, the MPLA is sure to use its leverage to prevent any resurgence of another ethnic-based party power, and other opposition parties will work to hold onto Bakongos that have swung their way during the long leadership vacuum in the FNLA. END COMMENT
FERNANDEZ